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RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 0296
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV 2041
RUEHJM/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM 1528
RUEHMS/AMEMBASSY MUSCAT 0084
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RUEHAD/AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI 1350
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RUEHDO/AMEMBASSY DOHA 0451
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RUEHAS/AMEMBASSY ALGIERS 0416
RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT 0603
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA 0885
RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI 0027
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 7907
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SUBJECT: ACS IN SYRIA - DECEIVED, DETAINED AND DEPORTED

11. (SBU) Summary. American Citizen Services (ACS) staff at Embassy Damascus had twenty cases of detention and/or abandonment of US citizens in the fourth quarter FY-2007. Six cases involved women fleeing their families due to abuse or to avoid arranged marriages. Four cases, some still ongoing, were families abandoned without documentation and therefore unable to leave Syria. Ten were detention cases by Syrian police or security forces. Embassy Damascus has begun more specific tracking of ACS cases by category, and will send quarterly updates on our activities. End Summary.

FLEEING THEIR FAMILIES

12. (SBU) Embassy Damascus saw six cases of flight or attempted flight in the last quarter (July-September) of FY2007. Four of these cases involved young women being forced into marriages by their fathers; one case is a 16-year old girl physically abused by her father; and one is a mother of three children who also falls under our "abandonment" category (see next section).

13. (SBU) Complicating these cases are elements of Syrian law that effectively turn wives and daughters into property, denying them the rights of free movement and of personal choice. Syrian men may

place travel bans on women in their family of any age and on underage male children. Once a travel ban has been filed, permission to travel must be given by a male member of the requesting family; e.g., a wife would need permission from her husband, husband's brother, or husband's father. The ban may be filed regardless of the nationality of the traveler. These bans mean that, even with a valid US passport, the traveler is unable to obtain the necessary exit stamp to leave Syria.

14. (SBU) Fortunately, two of the cases turned into success stories. US-born sisters, aged 19 and 21, were being forced by their father into marriages with their first cousins - arrangements for which it was estimated he would receive a sizeable payment. Consular staff ensured that both women had valid passports and cash for their escape, and helped them get exit stamps before a travel hold was placed on them. ConOff notified Embassy Beirut that the sisters might get across the border and contact them. When the sisters were able to break away from the family and cross the border into Lebanon, Embassy Beirut assisted their departure to the US.

15. (SBU) In two additional, unrelated, cases, 16- and 22-year old women were able to escape from their family homes and flee before the marriages took place. It is not uncommon for these women to be kept prisoner literally by their relatives. The 22-year old eloped with her fianc - the one of her choosing, not her father's - and was able to leave the country as "control" of her travel transferred from her father to her husband with the logistical assistance of the Section. The 16-year old reportedly ran away with her Syrian boyfriend. Her parents reported it as a kidnapping, and the couple were eventually caught and arrested after a period on the lamb. Both the girl and her family maintained contact with ConOff, and the

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girl even called ConOff in the middle of the night to be talked out of suicide. Upon being returned to her parents, the young woman told ConOff the entire affair was a misunderstanding, that she was now fine, and that perhaps she could marry the young man when she turned 18.

16. (SBU) Not all cases come to a clear resolution. One 16-year old AmCit daughter of divorced Syrian parents fled her father's house after physical abuse that included beating and having chunks of her hair torn out when she resisted. She is now living with her mother in violation of a Syrian order granting custody to the abusive father. ConOffs have met with the Syrian Attorney General about the case and continue to follow the girl's welfare and whereabouts.

ABANDONED AND ALONE

17. (SBU) Fourth quarter (July-September) FY2007 saw four reported cases of abandonment, three of which involved children. Abandonment is becoming increasingly common in Syria. The most usual scenario encountered is that of a mother and her children lured to Syria under false pretenses by a dual-national AmCit husband. He then takes away their passports and other documents, effectively stranding them in Syria. The husband may remain with his family here, but more often he goes back to the US or to some third country. In some cases, the wife and children live with their in-laws; in others, the family is left to fend for themselves. Even if the wife is an AmCit, there are limits to what ACS staff may do, because of the legal system and travel ban possibilities in Syria. Equally tragic are the Legal Permanent Resident (LPR) wives who have not yet naturalized in the US. Returning Resident petitions may be filed, but the expense (currently USD 400 for the filing and USD 380 for the new immigrant visa foil) is often a severe hardship on families with already depleted resources.

18. (SBU) During this quarter, Post assisted three AmCit and LPR women who had been abandoned with AmCit and/or LPR women. In these cases, Post counsels the women at length -- sometimes over a period of months -- on how to replace their documents and possibilities for departure. We also contact neighboring posts of destination to prepare them to receive the families if they can indeed depart Syria. Unfortunately, none of these three has yet been able to

leave.

DETENTION AND DEPORTATION

¶9. (SBU) In the last quarter of FY2007 (July-September), ten AmCits experienced SARG jails firsthand. Nine of them have since been released; the tenth will likely be in prison for years to come. Syrian police and security services are not known for their leniency. They have a pattern of locking up first and asking questions later. There have been instances where witnesses to a possible crime - against whom no allegations of any kind are ever

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filed - have been held for several days without access or redress. All detainees in this time period were men, and four of them were US citizens with no claims to Syrian dual-nationality. These four were either deported or encouraged to leave prior to their originally scheduled departure dates.

¶10. (SBU) Our current detainee, a 46-year old dual national, has been charged with the fatal shooting of his neighbor. A trial date has not been set, and he feared his son would become the victim of a revenge killing. In addition to regular ACS services, such as providing attorney information, ConOff assisted him in filing an IV petition for his son, who has since traveled to the US and taken up residence with his brother.

¶11. (SBU) One man was held overnight when, during a visit to his non-AmCit brother in a local prison, he insulted one of the prison guards. He may have also made insulting remarks about Syrian President Bashar al-Asad, which is a crime under Syrian law. He was released the next day. Similarly, another dual national was held overnight on what turned out to be "false impersonation charges" and was released the next afternoon. For these cases, we provided advice and attorneys' names to the families, but did not become involved directly.

¶12. (SBU) In some instances, dual-national businessmen refuse to take the seemingly logical step of simply leaving the country. One such man has been arrested several times on what he says are trumped-up charges meant to intimidate him into dropping a property dispute which he is winning. Each time he is held for several days and then released. Another businessman was held for four months on internet piracy charges. In each case, despite knowing that they are in danger of re-arrest at any time, they chose not only to stay in Syria but also to continue the business activities that led to their arrests. Although the Consular Section tracks the AmCits' whereabouts, we can do nothing more if our advice to leave the country goes unheeded.

¶13. (SBU) Consular staff recently repatriated a young man who had been held incommunicado for six weeks. Although of Syrian descent, his family had never registered him with Syrian authorities, so he is not officially a dual national. During his detention, Embassy Damascus sent repeated diplomatic notes emphasizing the danger of refusing access to an AmCit with a known heart condition. While the case has a happy ending, in that the man was released and repatriated, his experience is likely to leave psychological trauma that could require professional attention.

¶14. (SBU) Our most recent four cases involve AmCit men with no claims to dual nationality of any kind. Two of the men were traveling together, and told ConOff they were collecting license plates from every country in the world for an automotive museum. They were arrested by plainclothes officers when they tried to purchase Syrian license plates - a crime under Syrian law - in the local marketplace, and allegedly proceeded to fight the officers and resist arrest. They said they did not speak Arabic, did not realize they were under arrest, and feared they were being kidnapped. They

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were released after several hours, but their passports were kept by

the police, so they came to the Embassy to report the situation. ConOff was able to determine which police station was involved, meet with the officer in charge of the station, and get the passports back within two hours of the initial contact. (Note: The officer told ConOff that a diplomatic note had been sent via the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to inform Embassy Damascus of the incident and return the passports. As of this writing one month later, the MFA still has not passed that letter to the Embassy. End Note.) The two travelers moved up their departure plans and left Syria without further incident.

¶15. (SBU) The two deportation cases appear to be related but we cannot be entirely sure. A 20-year old student was sharing an apartment with a Syrian man and a British woman when the Syrian was arrested for selling marijuana at the local university. He denied the charges and said he was only buying it for his American roommate, information that led to the arrest of the American student. ConOff went to the drugs-crime holding station and insisted on access even though lower-level officers denied an AmCit was being held there. Once the General in charge of the station arrived, ConOff was able to see the young man and obtain Privacy Act waivers and contact information for his family in California. An OCS trust was set up and a local attorney was engaged by the family. When the matter came to the courts, the judge released the AmCit on condition he be deported within three days. (Note: Drugs crimes in Syria are taken extremely seriously, and this young man was facing up to three years for possession of marijuana. Had he been charged with intent to distribute, it would have carried the death penalty. End Note.) As is par for the course in Syria, the deportee must pay for his own transportation, and in this case an OCS trust was used. Fast action by Embassy staff got a ticket arranged in time to put the student on a plane that evening, rather than have him spend the upcoming weekend in a holding cell without food, water, or sanitary facilities. He was deported after spending a week in Syrian jails, where he said he saw not only neglect but also deliberate mistreatment and torture of other detainees.

¶16. (SBU) A potentially related deportation involves a friend of the student deported on drugs charges. This 22-year old AmCit had been living in Syria for several months. He had applied for his residency card and had met the student via mutual friends. During the drugs case, ConOff learned that the Syrian police were looking for this other AmCit, though they knew him by a different name. ConOff advised him to cut short his time in Syria but he chose to stay. A few weeks later, he contacted ConOff via cellular phone text message to say he was being detained by immigration authorities. Fortunately, they never connected him with the drugs matter, but gave him three days to leave the country. No specific reason was ever given for this decision. ConOff ensured the AmCit had all the information he needed and he opted to make his own departure arrangements.

COMMENT

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¶17. (SBU) Comment. We reiterate the fact that the SARG's opaque bureaucracy and competing security services results in the Embassy never being advised of detentions and frequently cannot gain access to detainees. If Consular staff have good relations with working-level officials, access at the local station can sometimes be obtained, but speed is essential. Embassy Damascus has begun more specific tracking of ACS cases by category, and will send quarterly updates on our activities.

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